

A Light at the End of the Tunnel

The Stories of Muslim Teens

A collection of short stories written by
Sumaiya Beshir and other Muslim teens

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The Identity Trap

Nine years since the day I first entered my high school as a grade nine student, after finishing my secondary education, starting and completing a university degree in neuroscience, and beginning my life as a young Muslim woman in the Canadian workforce, after forgetting the names of most of my teachers, the titles of most of my textbooks, and the faces of most of my peers, I can still remember my friend Elizabeth's outfit on the first day of school.

It was the Tuesday after Labour Day, a cool fall morning at 8:15 when the bell first rang and we were ushered into Ms. Bernard's class for the first time. The looks on our faces were a blend of fear, excitement, and lack of sleep, each person looking to find a chair in the maze of tables, to seat themselves somewhere important, as close to the students in designer labels as possible—without looking desperate—and as far from the fat boy with glasses as possible—without looking shallow.

Because I hesitated too long, because I looked for my seat, tried to analyze the right place to sit instead of finding a place as quickly as I could, I ended up at an entirely forgettable table, not cool or uncool, just there with the other kids who belonged somewhere in the middle of the high school continuum of importance. Maybe I could have been considered the "freak" at my table. After all, I was the only person in the classroom, probably the only person in the whole school, wearing a headscarf. But I'd been wearing it for three years, and had gotten over the obvious attention it brought me, the arrow it pointed my way.

Elizabeth was sitting two tables away in the front of the room, even her position signifying, right from the start, that she mattered, that she was ahead, that people should look her way. I quietly chided myself for being just another person at one of the middle tables,

average, forgettable. She was wearing a purple mini-skirt and a black, lacey t-shirt, with a low neckline, her reddish-blondish hair falling onto her shoulders, bangs just long enough that she would need to constantly brush them out of her eyes. Her make up was super-model perfect. Her sandals had pointy heels.

I can't remember for sure what I was wearing that day, but my typical grade nine outfit consisted of baggy jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt or sweatshirt to go with my white headscarf and running shoes. No makeup. No nail polish. No bangs in the eyes. I believed in this, hadn't been forced into wearing hijab by my parents, but there was always that little part of me who would see a girl like Elizabeth and think, "if only I could look that good..."

The rest of the first day is a blur in my mind, who met who, where we ate, what we learned. It was the following weeks that made their stamp on the next four years of my life, those first few weeks of high school, when you're trying to figure out where you fit, whether to stay in your junior-high cliques or to meet new people, carve out a new identity, become someone different. In my head I entered high school with the goal to be a different Kareema than the one I'd been in junior high. The junior high Kareema had been the smartest girl in the class, the one who'd write the answers on the board at the teacher's request during math class, the one with her work done first, but still sitting quietly. Junior-high Kareema sang in the choir. She didn't play on any of the school's sports teams. She didn't have leads in school plays. She didn't know the popular kids, or rather they didn't know her.

My plan was to make high school Kareema an improvement. To be picked early on in gym class. To play on the sports teams. To be more than "the smart girl". I wanted to be the witty girl. The creative girl. And—just a little bit—I wanted to be the pretty girl.

So over those first few weeks, I sat near Elizabeth in our shared classes, and within a month, her and I had become part of the same

group of friends, a group that sat together, ate lunch together, walked together from class to class, traded jokes and whispers. There were four of us in the core group: Elizabeth, Brenda, Christianne, and I. Of course, there were others like Mindy, Tamara, Juliana, and Kim who shifted in and out of the various circles, including ours.

I sometimes wonder if my three friends and I sought each other out because we were really the best friends for each other, or because each of our outward identities didn't threaten anyone else's. Elizabeth (who was only called Elizabeth by the teachers, everyone else called her Lizzie) was our requisite pretty girl. She was the one whose outfits were diligently complimented every morning, whose hairdo was jealously pointed too, whose makeup was marveled over. I was the smart one, the one who was asked for the answers to last night's homework, the one who was turned to for explanations about trigonometry and chemical equations. Christianne was the creative one. We listened to her poems, read the books she recommended and paid attention to the way she decorated her locker. Brenda was our two-in-one witty-slash-sporty girl. She played football, soccer, and rugby. She joked about the teachers. She made faces about everything. She made impressions of the principal and school president. Her job was to make us laugh and our job was to laugh.

Even our names said something about our chosen or imposed identities. Lizzie's name was fun and light and soft to say. It sounded exactly like the way she looked, like the way she walked, like the way she smiled. There was a sparkle to it, a certain radiance.

Christianne's name was who she wanted to become: the sophisticated artist. All through grade school and junior-high, Christianne had been the sporty girl, and all her friends and family had called her Chris. I remember a few of the other kids in our school who'd been in junior-high with her, a girl named Nancy who kept calling her Chris, and Christianne would correct her with an exasperated look in her eyes, a "that was then" look, before she turned back to her latest

creative endeavor. Christianne's name had a European sound to it, which added to the mystery, the classiness of it to our Canadian ears. We loved the way it rolled off our tongues, the way it made us feel like we were characters in a foreign film.

Brenda was either called Brenda or just "Bren" if we needed to shorten it. Tough, strong, tomboyish and easy to laugh along with. It fit her identity perfectly, the sporty, funny girl.

Me, I was just Kareema. Simple, practical Kareema, no short or long versions, no endearing nicknames. I kept trying to think of a change in my name that would give my identity more flair but nothing worked. It fit perfectly with being the practical girl, the smart girl.

Still, I wanted to be more than the smart, practical, boring girl, and grade nine was the only chance I had at a new beginning, the only chance to cement myself in a different role than the same old one I'd been playing for two years. I had to do something now before I was stuck like this for another four years, so when Bren showed up at lunch one afternoon and said she was trying out for the junior tennis team, and asked if anyone wanted to go with her, I knew I had to do it. All it took was one look around me and I was convinced: there I was, with Christianne on one side of me, in a tie-dyed peasant dress, writing a poem, and Lizzie on the other side, re-applying her 'Won't Kiss Off' Cover-Girl lipstick, and waterproof mascara. Who was I kidding? These girls had the market covered on creative and pretty. At least there was more than one available opening for sporty. I had to take it.

Tennis try-outs were after school in mid-October and would last a week before the team was picked, but it became clear on day one that I would make the team. Not because I could serve like a pro, or volley very well, not because my forehand or backhand was good, not because I could rally and run and my competitive spirit was something to be reckoned with, but because there were exactly the same

number of spots on the team as there were people trying out. I was partially insulted: I wanted to make it on my own merits, to be good enough that with 30 other people fighting for my spot, I would still beat them out, but that was in my dream-world. In reality, I held my breath and prayed that no one else would try out for the rest of the week so I could make the team.

And my prayers were answered. It felt so good for the two weeks before our first tournament to casually mention to everyone I saw that I was on the tennis team—leaving out of course the part about *how* I'd made it. I carried my tennis racket to and from every afternoon class, telling myself that there was no time after the final bell rang to get it from my locker—which was all the way in the North end of the school on the second floor—before I had to be at the Gym—which was all the way in the South end of the school on the first floor—for warm up. Half the time after class, I would end up walking back to the lockers with Bren anyway, since she insisted on leaving her racket upstairs, and we'd rush back down the hall and through the stairwells on a mission not to be late, huffing for air by the time we arrived at the gym doors.

My first tennis tournament was a rude awakening: I lost every match in the round-robin and failed to make the play-offs, so I spent the rest of the day playing Bren's cheerleader-slash-water-girl, refilling her bottle and trying to give her tips on where to stand and how far to hit. I had one more tournament a week later, which I also lost every match at, before tennis season, and my first attempt at sportiness, was over. It's hard to describe now, so many years later, how difficult it was to answer people when they asked me how I'd done. A sense of resentment would pour over me as I tried to answer the questions lightly, explain away how tough most of my opponents had been, move quickly on to another topic. Strangely, it was always easiest to bring up some schoolwork to change the subject, which would lead my friends to ask me for help in the math or science homework, help I